A Dispute on the Path

> “Ānanda, about the path or way of practice, should a dispute arise in the Saṅgha, this dispute would be for much detriment, much unhappiness of the many; for the disadvantage, the detriment, the suffering of gods and humans.”
>
> — Gotama Buddha, Sāmagāma Sutta (MN104.5)

For decades, the subject of *jhāna* and *samādhi* has been a source of confusion and disagreement in Theravāda Buddhism. This is not just a scholarly debate; it’s an unhealthy state of affairs that erodes faith and creates doubt for earnest practitioners. This presentation will walk directly into this dispute to reveal a clear and liberating resolution.

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Two Views, One Unsettling Conflict

Jhāna is Unnecessary

- **The Belief:** Many believe mental absorption (*jhāna*) is not required for liberation.
- **The Conflict:** This view is directly contradicted by the Suttas, which repeatedly describe the four *jhānas* as part of the Noble Eightfold Path.
- **The Result:** Practitioners may harbor doubts, vacillate in their practice, or cling harder to a view that conflicts with the canonical texts. The subject becomes taboo.

Jhāna is Necessary

- **The Belief:** Many believe mental absorption (*jhāna*) is essential.
- **The Conflict:** Practitioners strive for absorption but may find it doesn't lead to real liberation. Old patterns of suffering return, sometimes even worsening.
- **The Result:** Practitioners may question the path, wonder what's missing, and feel stuck, persevering without a clear understanding of why their practice isn't bearing fruit.

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The Clash of Authorities: Why This Debate Persists

The Sutta Position

- The Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the cessation of *dukkha*, explicitly includes *sammā-samādhi* (Right Concentration).
- *Sammā-samādhi* is repeatedly and consistently defined in the Suttas as the four *jhānas*.
- Therefore, according to the Suttas, *jhāna* is necessary for liberation.

The Masters' Position

Ajahn Chah: "That which can be most harmful to the meditator is absorption *samādhi* (*jhāna*)... We just get stuck on that happiness. This is a danger..."

Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "We don't need *jhānic samādhi*; you cannot use absorption concentration for *vipassanā*. Yogis who develop *jhāna*... need to get out of *jhāna* first."

Master Sheng Yen: "The Ch'an practice... is not for you to enter *samādhi* [get into an absorbed state]... but rather to be able to let go of everything and be at ease... as you live your life."

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Pinpointing the Source of the Divergence

Original Teachings

Source 1: The Pāli Suttas

- The foundational texts of Theravāda Buddhism.
- Consistently define the path to liberation (dukkha·nirodha·gāminī paṭipadā) as the Noble Eightfold Path.
- Explicitly define the eighth factor, sammā-samādhi, as the attainment of the four jhānas.
- **Conclusion **from Suttas****: Jhāna is necessary.

Source 2: The Visuddhimagga & Later Texts

- A highly regarded 5th-century commentary and practice manual.
- Introduces the concept of the sukkha·vipassaka ("dry-insight worker"). This is an arahant (a fully awakened being) who attains liberation without previous experience of jhāna.
- ****Conclusion from Post-Canonical Texts**:** Jhāna is optional.

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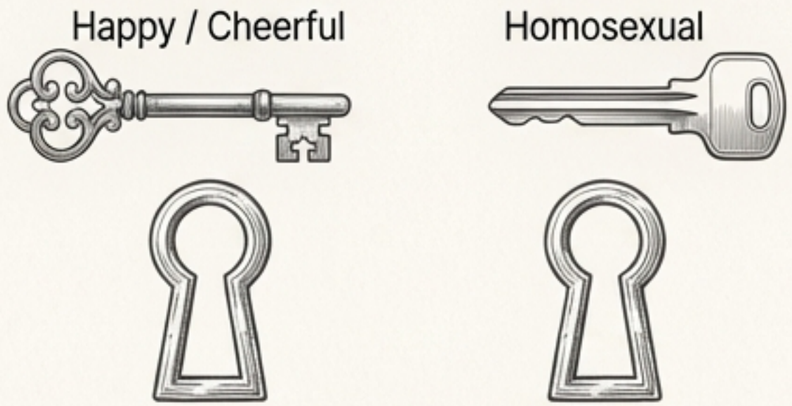
The Resolution is Not Doctrinal, It's Semantic

The Suttas and the Visuddhimagga are not contradicting each other on the path.
They are using the same word, "*jhāna*," to describe two different states.



GAY

- Decades ago, if someone said, "I'm so gay," they meant they were happy or cheerful.
- Today, they would almost certainly mean they are homosexual.
- The word is the same. The meaning has changed. You wouldn't say the dictionary from 1950 is "wrong." You would recognize the semantic shift.

The Same Logic Applies to *Jhāna*

- When we hear '*jhāna*' today, we are conditioned to think of an absorbed meditative state, as defined by the Visuddhimagga.
- This is not what the word meant in the Pāli Suttas.

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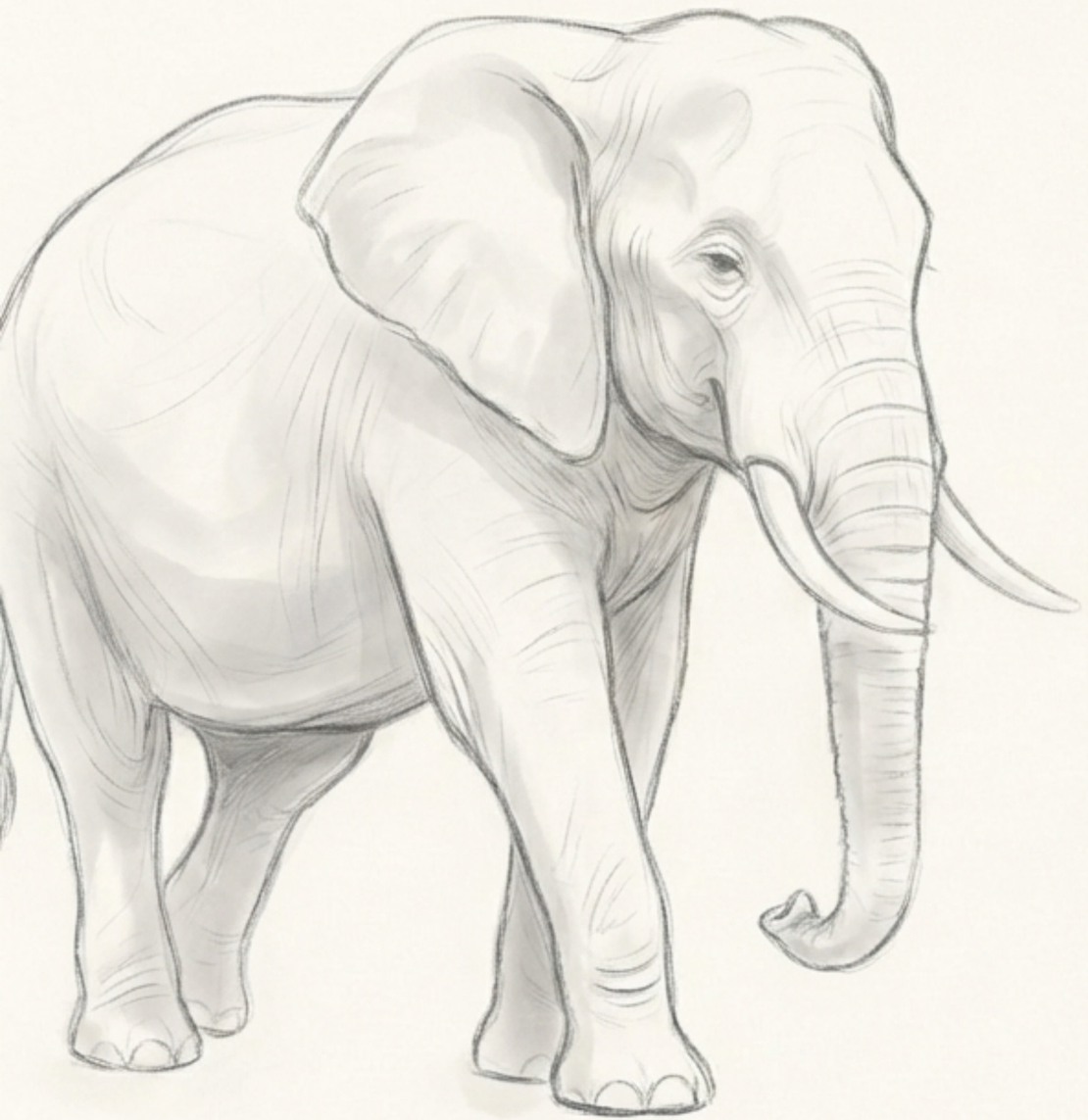

Walking Through the Elephant: Both Views are Correct

By understanding the semantic shift, the contradiction dissolves:

1. **The jhāna of the Suttas IS necessary for the cessation of dukkha.**
    - This is the practice described as the eighth factor of the Noble Path.
2. **The jhāna of the Visuddhimagga IS NOT necessary for the cessation of dukkha.**
    - This is the deep absorption state that masters like Ajahn Chah rightfully cautioned against as a potential trap of attachment.

The two sets of scriptures are right, according to their own terminology. The revered masters are not deviating from the Buddha's teachings; they are correctly identifying the limitations of the Visuddhimagga-style jhāna for the ultimate goal of liberation.

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Comparing the Two Paths: An In-Depth Analysis

SUTTAS

VISUDDHIMAGGA

To fully appreciate the distinction, we will now compare the two understandings of *jhāna* across several key dimensions.

The following analysis is based on the work of scholars and practitioners who have investigated this contrast, including:

- Richard Shankman (*The Experience of Samādhi*)
- Ajahn Ṭhānissaro (*Wings to Awakening*)
- Ayodhya Prasad Pradhan (*The Buddha's System of Meditation*)

This is not a new discovery, but a growing consensus that clarifies the path for all practitioners.

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Foundational Differences: A Scholarly Comparison

The following table from Richard Shankman's *The Experience of Samādhi* highlights the fudamental fundamental distinctions between the two models of *jhāna*.

	SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
The 4 Absorptions	Called the 4 *jhānas*	Called the *rūpa jhānas*
The 4 Formless Attainments	Called the *āruppas*	Usually called the *āruppas*; sometimes *arūpa jhānas*
Type of Concentration	Unification of mind	One-pointed concentration fixed on a single object
Body Awareness	Suggests heightened experience of and insight into the physical body	No experience of the physical body and changing phenomena
Insight Practice	Suggests insight practice can occur ***within*** jhāna	Insight must come ***while not in*** jhāna
Nimitta	A general term for "sign" or "basis," not a specific visual object	A visual image arising in access concentration, used to attain jhāna
Concentration Terms	"Preparatory," "access," and "fixed" concentration terms are not found	These terms are used

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A Growing Consensus Among Scholars & Practitioners

"The suttas and the Visuddhimagga are in agreement that a state of strong concentration totally divorced from any awareness of the body is not necessary for Awakening. They differ simply in that the suttas do not define such a state as onttuting the four jhānas, whereas the Visuddhimagga does."

– Richard Shankman

"...what jhāna means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon. Because of this difference we can say that the commentaries are right in viewing their type of jhāna as unnecessary for Awakening, but Awakening cannot occur without the attainment of jhāna in the canonical sense."

– Ajahn Ṭhānissaro

"...The tradition preserved in commentaries, especially in Buddhaghosa's work entitled the 'Visuddhi-magga' ... seems to have developed a system of its own.... anyone who intends to devote ... his time and energy ... will not fail, I believe, to detect the contrast."

– Ayodhya Prasad Pradhan (writing in 1986)

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The Role of Jhāna on the Path to Liberation

SUTTAS

Necessary

Jhāna is explicitly the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Kīṭāgiri Sutta (MN70) classifies spiritual attainers. While some (*paññā·vimutta*) may not have the formless states (*āruppā*), none are said to lack the four *jhānas*.

VISUDDHIMAGGA

Optional

The concept of the *sukkha·vipassaka* (dry-insight worker) implies that awakening is possible without jhāna.

This model creates a path for practitioners who focus purely on insight (*vipassanā·yānika*).

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Jhāna as an Action vs. Jhāna as a State

SUTTAS

A Mental Action

The most important distinction. Jhāna is something the mind *does*.

Attainable

Attainable with the first seven path-factors as its requisites.

Effort Required

Practice cultivation, either with a set intention (*paṇidhāya bhāvanā*) or without (*appaṇidhāya bhāvanā*).

VISUDDHIMAGGA

A Mental State

Jhāna is a state the mind *enters* and abides in.

Difficult to Attain

Attainable by only one in a million, or even one in a billion, practitioners according to the Visuddhimagga (XII.8).

Effort Required

Persistent, one-pointed focus on a single object to produce a conceptual object (*nimitta*) for absorption.

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The Relationship with Mindfulness (*Sati*)

SUTTAS

Mindfulness Leads to Jhāna

The practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* (establishments of mindfulness) is the basis for *samādhi*.

Quote (MN44.12): *Cattāro satipaṭṭhānā samādhi·nimittā* (The four establishments of mindfulness are the bases for *samādhi*).

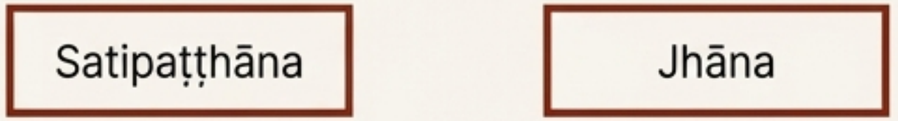
Sammā-sati leads to Sammā-samādhi

The Micchatta Sutta (AN10.103) states this directly: “From proper mindfulness, proper *samādhi* originates.” This disproves the idea that one must attain jhāna *before* practicing mindfulness.

VISUDDHIMAGGA

Mindfulness and Jhāna are Mutually Exclusive

Insight practice (*vipassanā*, based on mindfulness) and absorption (*jhāna*) are separate practices. One must exit jhāna to practice vipassanā.



This model creates a division between “samatha” (calm) and “vipassanā” (insight) practitioners.

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The Inner Experience: Key Phenomenological Differences

SUTTAS

Hindrances are...
Abandoned (*pahīna*)

The underlying tendencies are dealt with and let go of.

***Vitakka* & *Vicāra* mean...**
Thinking & Considering

These are cognitive activities that are gradually stilled.

Type of Joy (*Pīti*) is...
Peaceful & Subtle

Born of separation (from sensuality and unskilful states). It is described as delightful, nice, and profound.

VISUDDHIMAGGA

Hindrances are...
Suppressed (*vikkhambhita*)

The hindrances are temporarily pushed down by the force of concentration.

***Vitakka* & *Vicāra* mean...**
Initial & Sustained Application

These refer to the application of attention onto the meditation object.

Type of Joy (*Pīti*) is...
Thrilling & Rapturous

Described as elating; ‘delight in the attaining of the desired object.’

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The Point of Focus: The Act vs. The Object

SUTTAS

Most Important: The Act of Meditation

The *Suttas* describe the *jhānas* in terms of the meditative action itself. The object is mentioned only occasionally and can even change as the practice deepens (e.g., from “these dhammas” to “some [mind] brightening basis”).

VISUDDHIMAGGA

Most Important: The Object of Meditation

The *Visuddhimagga* spends extensive passages describing the object (*kasiṇa*, *nimitta*, etc.). The practice is to focus on the object to build concentration and induce absorption.

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The Path Made Clear

The elephant in the room was never a monster to be slain or a wall to be circumnavigated. It was an illusion born from a semantic shift over centuries.

The conflict between the Suttas and the commentaries dissolves when we understand they are describing two different things with one word:

- **Sutta Jhāna**: A necessary, integrated part of the Noble Path—a way of acting with a unified, mindful mind.
- **Visuddhimagga Jhāna**: A powerful, optional state of deep absorption, which can be a tool or a trap.

Knowing this contrast makes discussions on jhāna more fruitful and less contentious. More importantly, it clears away the confusion, allowing each practitioner to walk the path with confidence, understanding, and renewed faith in the Dhamma.

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